

COMMUNICATING THE VALUE & COST OF WATER SERVICES

A TOOLKIT FOR UTILITY
& COMMUNITY LEADERS



**US Water
Alliance**

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Context of the Issue	4
Toolkit Overview	5
Communication Material Development Process	6
Columbus and Portland Communication Materials	8
Editable Templates and Adaptation Guidance	15
Considerations Beyond the Toolkit	16
Appendix	17

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our work to help utility and community leaders communicate the value and costs of water services is made possible with the support of The Water Foundation.

The US Water Alliance is grateful to the following staff and individuals in Columbus, Ohio and Portland, Oregon for their contributions to this work:

Utility and Community Leaders from Columbus

The materials were developed with contributions from Columbus Water and Power, and IMPACT Community Action.

Utility and Community Leaders from Portland

The materials were developed with contributions from Portland Water Bureau, Bureau of Environmental Services, Verde, and the African American Alliance for Homeownership.

Thank you to the community members of Columbus and Portland who contributed their time to the focus groups.

CONTEXT OF THE ISSUE

Many people are unaware of what it takes to deliver clean drinking water, treat wastewater, and manage stormwater. Water services are capital-intensive, heavily regulated, and require a skilled workforce to keep the systems operating and well maintained. They are also public enterprises, meaning they should generate sufficient revenue to cover the costs of providing those services without drawing on other funds, like tax revenue. Much of the infrastructure, maintenance, and labor required to provide these essential services remains largely unseen by the public, as the infrastructure is mainly underground and the service is otherwise very reliable and something people come to expect. Because of this, community members may not fully understand why rate increases are necessary and thus question or resist utility rate increases.

When utilities do not raise rates enough to keep up with daily capital, operational, and maintenance costs, they may struggle to provide the services that communities depend on every day. Over time, the cost of operating, repairing, and replacing aging infrastructure can exceed available funding. This leads to declining reliability of critical infrastructure and service disruptions. Not only do those disruptions impact water access, but they also impact public health, local businesses, community well-being, and economic stability.

This creates a difficult cycle. Limited rate increases reduce the funding available for system operations, maintenance, and improvements, which can lead to service problems. In turn, those problems can weaken public trust in utilities and increase resistance to future rate adjustments, making it even harder to sustain the system over the long term.

For this reason, clearly communicating the value and costs of providing water services is essential. Delivering safe drinking water to homes and businesses, collecting and treating wastewater, and managing stormwater and flooding all require extensive infrastructure, skilled workers, continuous maintenance, and long-term financial investment. As noted above, although much of this work goes unseen, it is critical to the health, safety, and everyday functioning of communities. Now is the time for water service providers and partners to clearly and consistently communicate the true scale of investment required to deliver essential water services.



TOOLKIT OVERVIEW

Because many communities across the country lack awareness about the value, complexity, and cost of delivering water services, there is an urgent need for water service providers and partners to clearly communicate the scale of investment required to deliver essential water services. The US Water Alliance (the Alliance) partnered with two communities — Portland, Oregon, and Columbus, Ohio — to craft and test messages and graphics that would resonate with members of these communities and explore different communication channels. The Alliance aimed to find clear and effective ways to communicate how water systems operate, how much they cost, and why they matter. The goal was to develop communication resources that make the true cost of water service more transparent, help people understand why rates are necessary, and build trust between utilities and the communities they serve.

This practical toolkit includes both resulting communication materials and an explanation of the process used to develop messaging and solicit feedback. It also provides guidance for utility and community leaders on how to apply these methods in their own communities, along with insights into the design considerations and adaptable templates. Utility leaders and partners will need to customize their messaging, but the toolkit offers a strong foundation for clearly communicating the value and costs of water systems, as well as their impact on community members.



COMMUNICATION MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND GUIDANCE FOR YOUR APPROACH

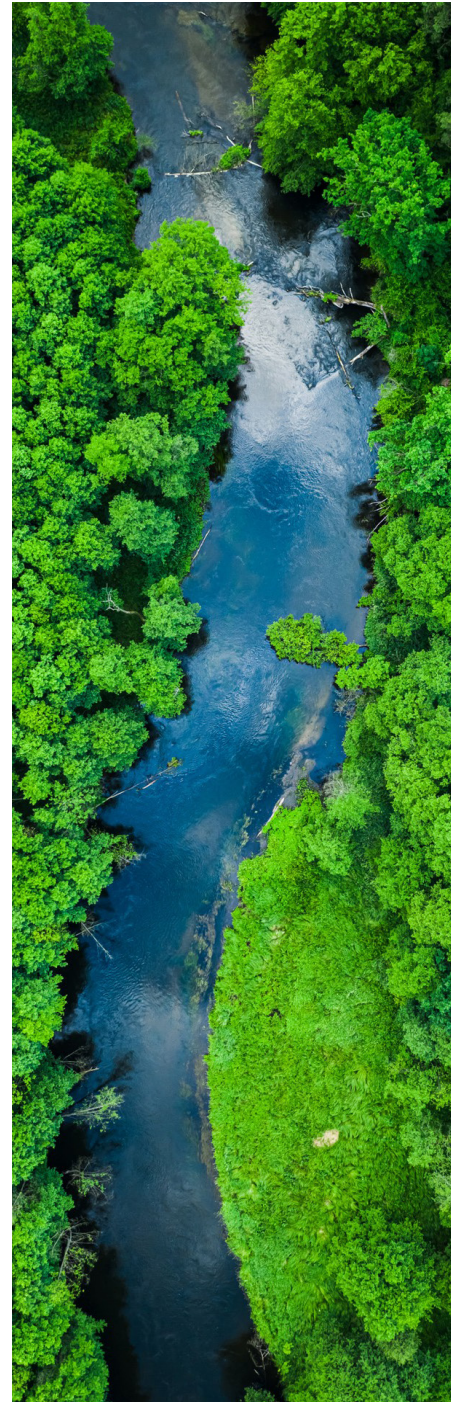
The Alliance and its partners developed communication materials through the following five-step process.

STEP 1: Scoping and stakeholder engagement

The Alliance facilitated one-hour scoping calls with utility and community leaders in Portland and Columbus to identify knowledge barriers, messaging needs, community and cultural priorities, and local context. These communities were selected **after** participating in the [2024-2026 Affordability Taskforce](#) convened by the Alliance and expressing interest in **developing this toolkit**. The Alliance and partners identified the type and purpose of these materials during these scoping calls. Because there are many ways to communicate with community members, a key goal of these calls was to determine which communication methods each community wanted to prioritize.

For Columbus, the team decided to develop three primary communication materials: a bill insert/mailer, interactive boards for in-person engagement events, and a social media carousel. The bill insert/mailer and social media carousel contain the same core information, so that community members can still access the content even if they do not directly receive a utility bill. Community and utility leaders in Columbus also plan to host engagement events over the next several years, so they prioritized informational materials that can be reused at those events while also helping collect community feedback and insights.

For Portland, the team decided to create a bill insert/mailer that could also function as a banner for in-person events, an informational one-pager that can be distributed at events or included in newsletters, and a social media carousel focused on a major, costly capital project with significant community impact. The one-pager aligns with information already available on the utility's website to ensure consistent messaging across communication channels.



STEP 2: Initial material development

Based on insights from the scoping calls, the Alliance developed messaging and visual concepts for three communication materials per community. These materials were specific to each community's communication needs and service-related context (e.g., the source of drinking water or treatment process).

STEP 3: Community testing and feedback

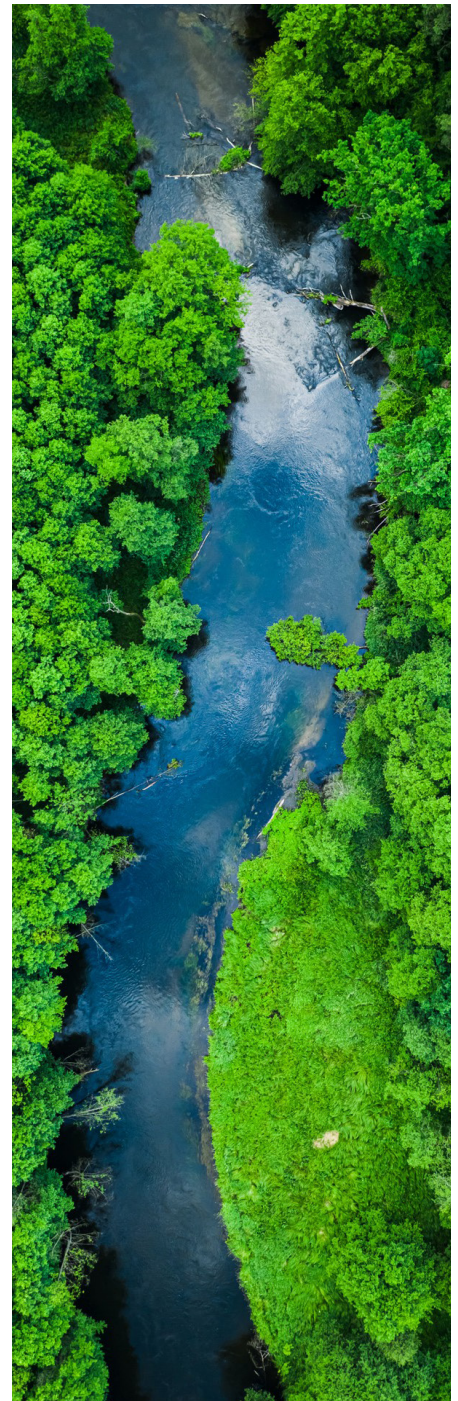
The Alliance facilitated virtual 90-minute focus groups with community members to test the materials and gather feedback on clarity, understanding, credibility, and trust. Alliance staff and utility and community leaders facilitated small groups in which they presented each communication material individually and asked participants for general feedback and questions about the topics listed above. The Alliance developed flyers for local community-based partners to distribute and recruit participants for the focus groups. The flyers are included in the Appendix. Community members were compensated for their time and expertise.

STEP 4: Refinement and revisions

The Alliance reviewed the focus group findings and revised the materials to better reflect community feedback. Insights from community members were incredibly valuable. Details on how materials were updated are included on a case-by-case basis in the next section.

STEP 5: Final toolkit development

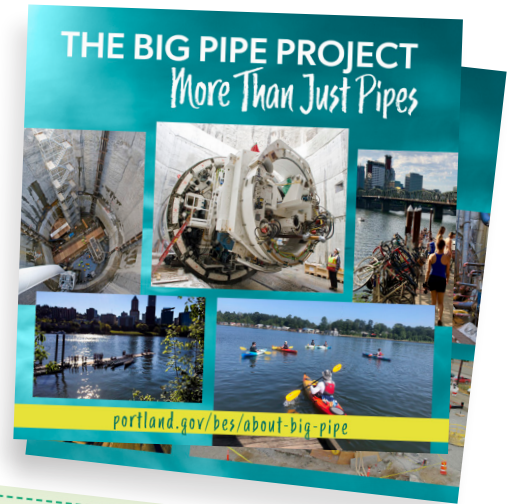
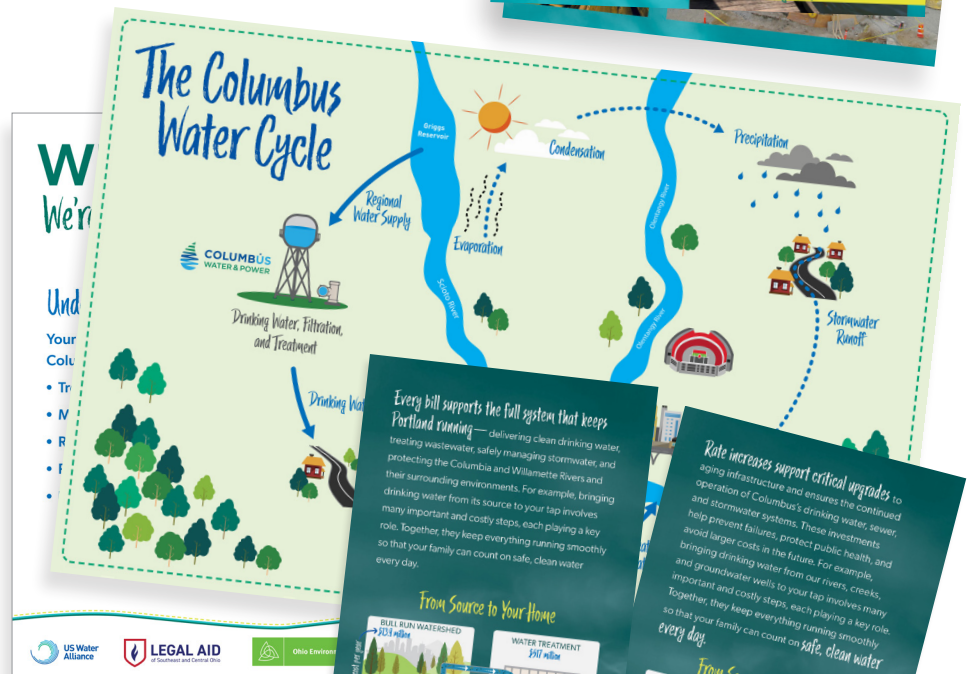
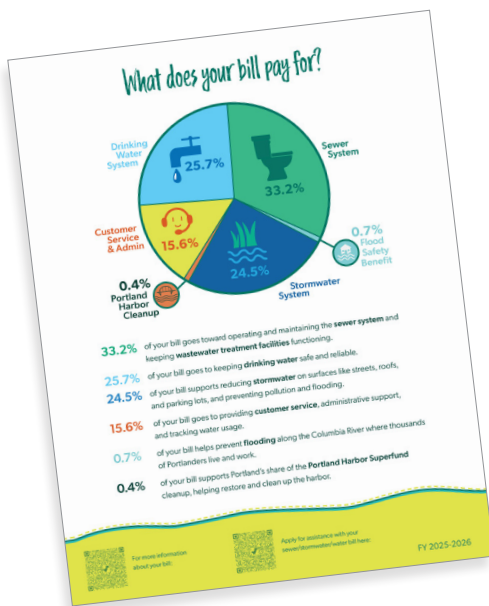
The Alliance produced this toolkit, including customized materials for Portland and Columbus. The Alliance then updated the materials into editable templates that toolkit users can adapt to their own local context and conditions.



COLUMBUS AND PORTLAND COMMUNICATION MATERIALS

Below are the communication materials developed for Columbus and Portland through the process outlined. The materials include intentional design elements that help communicate the value and costs of essential water services. These design elements were initially ground-truthed by members of the US Water Alliance 2024-2026 Affordability Taskforce and further refined by community members during the virtual focus groups.

Insights into the design considerations are provided for each communication material. These elements are shown using arrows that point to specific material components.



COLUMBUS

Bill Insert/Mailer and Banner

Black Text: Initial unchanged content.

Blue Text: Specific insights from community members.

Light Blue Box: Why the community feedback matters.

Rate increases support critical upgrades to aging infrastructure and ensures the continued operation of Columbus's drinking water, sewer, and stormwater systems. These investments help prevent failures, protect public health, and avoid larger costs in the future. For example, bringing drinking water from our rivers, creeks, and groundwater wells to your tap involves many important and costly steps, each playing a key role. Together, they keep everything running smoothly so that your family can count on *safe, clean water every day.*

From Source to Your Home



For water-saving tips or to learn how you can access cost-saving benefit programs, visit us online.



To learn more about the water treatment process, visit us online.

Initial Text: This messaging was developed to reflect priorities identified by community members in Columbus. It highlights where Columbus's drinking water comes from, how it is treated, and the investments required to maintain safe, reliable water service.

Source Water Square: The darker color of the water, along with visuals such as minerals, sticks, and fish, illustrates that source water is untreated and not yet safe to drink. These elements help show that water must go through multiple, costly treatment processes before becoming potable.

Why this matters: The focus group revealed that many community members ask why they cannot drink water directly from nearby rivers, lakes, and streams. Therefore, participants stressed the importance of visually showing what the water looks like before and after treatment to clearly explain why treatment is necessary.

Program Cost Per Year/Average Cost Per Household: Each square explains the cost of maintaining that part of the water system and shows how those costs affect the average customer's water bill.

Why this matters: The focus group revealed that many community members were surprised by how expensive it is to build, maintain, and operate each stage of the water treatment process. They also wanted to understand how these overall program costs affect their household water bills.

Filtration Square: After moving through reservoirs, treatment, and filtration systems, the water appears clearer and brighter to represent that it has been treated and is now safe to drink.

QR Codes: These QR codes direct readers to additional information about the content featured in the mailer or banner.

COLUMBUS

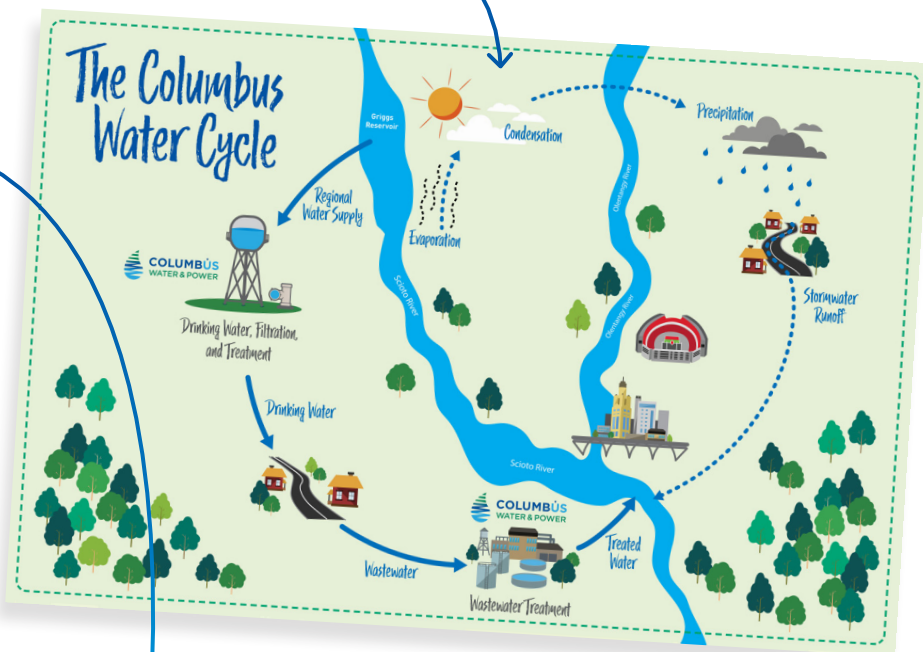
Interactive Poster Boards for Community Meetings

Water Cycle: This graphic highlights recognizable locations in Columbus, along with key stages of the water cycle and examples of local water utility infrastructure.

Post-it Question Box: This section provides community members with an opportunity to ask utility and community leaders questions about their water bills and the local water systems.

Understanding Your Water

Bill: This text clearly explains what community members' water bills help fund and maintain, including essential water system services and infrastructure.



WELCOME!
We're glad you joined us!

Understanding Your Water Bill

Your bill helps to maintain the Columbus Water System:

- Treating drinking water
- Managing wastewater
- Reducing flooding
- Protecting local waterways
- Updating infrastructure

What do you wish you better understood about your water bill?
Draw or write your questions on a post-it note!

Logos at the bottom include: US Water Alliance, LEGAL AID of Southeast and Central Ohio, Ohio Environmental Council, THE CITY OF COLUMBUS, COLUMBUS WATER & POWER, and IMPACT.

COLUMBUS

Social Media Carousel

These images are consistent with the design of the bill insert and banner materials. Presenting the same information on social media helps expand reach and engagement, especially among people who may not receive a water bill directly, such as renters.



PORTLAND

Informational One Pager

Black Text: Initial unchanged content.

Blue Text: Specific insights from community members.

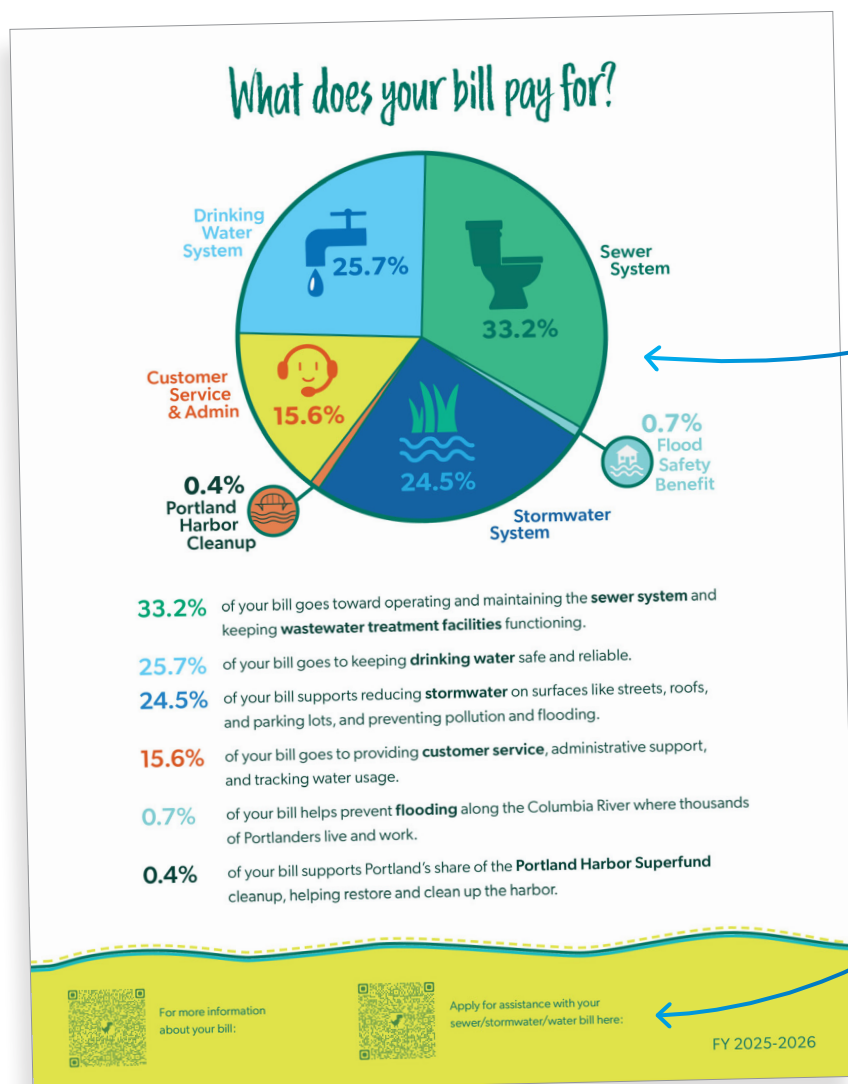
Light Blue Box: Why the community feedback matters.

Pie Chart: This chart shows how water bills are divided across different parts of the systems, including drinking water, sewer, and stormwater services.

Why this matters: Initially, the icon used to represent the sewer system was a manhole. The focus group revealed that many community members do not recognize that image, prompting the team to use a toilet instead.

Bottom Half Text: This section provides additional detail on each category in the chart, explaining what each portion of the bill helps fund.

QR Code: This QR code directs readers to more information about their water bill.



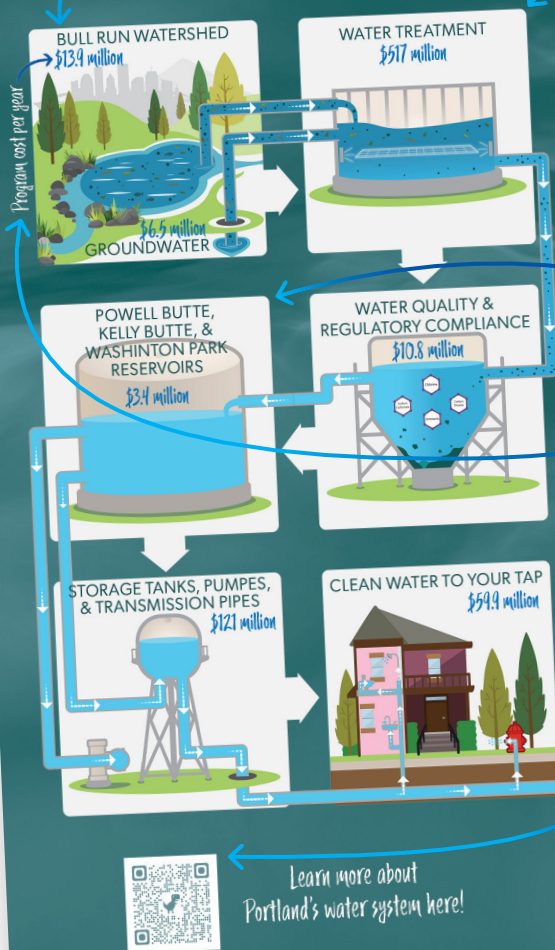
PORTLAND

Bill Insert/Mailer and Banner

Black Text: Initial unchanged content.
Blue Text: Specific insights from community members.
Light Blue Box: Why the community feedback matters.

Every bill supports the full system that keeps Portland running — delivering clean drinking water, treating wastewater, safely managing stormwater, and protecting the Columbia and Willamette Rivers and their surrounding environments. For example, bringing drinking water from its source to your tap involves many important and costly steps, each playing a key role. Together they keep everything running smoothly so that your family can count on safe, clean water every day.

From Source to Your Home



Initial Text: This messaging was developed to reflect priorities identified by community members in Portland as determined during the scoping call. It highlights the importance of protecting the environment, specifically two rivers that are central to community recreation and enjoyment.

Source Water Square: The darker water color and visuals such as minerals, sticks, and fish show that source water is untreated and not safe to drink. These elements illustrate that water must go through multiple treatment processes before it becomes potable.

Filtration Square: In Portland, filtration occurs before filtration is considered the treatment. This reflects the unique flow of the local system and is a reminder to ensure materials match each water system's actual process.

Why this matters: Focus groups revealed that it is important to accurately reflect each step in the source-to-tap process in these materials. As a result, the team moved filtration to occur before treatment in the sequence.

Reservoir Square: After filtration and treatment, the water appears clearer and brighter, representing that it is now safe to drink.

Program Cost Per Year: Each square explains the cost of operating and maintaining that part of the water system.

QR Code: The QR code directs readers to additional information about the content featured in the mailer or banner.

PORTLAND

Social Media Carousel

Black Text: Initial unchanged content.
Blue Text: Specific insights from community members.
Light Blue Box: Why the community feedback matters.

Slide 1: This image, along with several others in the social media carousel, shows actual construction work from the Big Pipe Project.

Slide 2: This slide was added after the focus group.

Why this matters: Community members emphasized that they need to understand both the original problem and what the project solved in order to fully grasp the impact of the infrastructure and effort.

Slide 4: Because the Big Pipe Project reduces combined sewer overflows into the Willamette River, people can safely enjoy recreational activities on the river, as shown in this image.

QR Code: The QR code directs readers to additional information about the content featured in this social media carousel.



EDITABLE TEMPLATES AND ADAPTATION GUIDANCE

The following communication templates were inspired by the materials developed for Portland and Columbus. They are editable through Adobe InDesign, so users can adapt them to reflect their own water systems and community priorities.

It is recommended that utility leaders host community focus groups or other engagement events prior to adapting these graphics in order to learn from community members and understand local priorities and preferred communication mediums.

The Alliance also recommends that community leaders who plan to adapt communication materials for their communities collaborate with utilities to understand the costs of operating and maintaining each part of the water system, how those costs affect households, and how the average household water bill is allocated.

TEMPLATE: Mailer

[DOWNLOAD INDESIGN TEMPLATE](#)

[PREVIEW PDF](#)

TEMPLATE: Poster

[DOWNLOAD INDESIGN TEMPLATE](#)

[PREVIEW PDF](#)

TEMPLATE: Pie Chart

[DOWNLOAD INDESIGN TEMPLATE](#)

[PREVIEW PDF](#)

TEMPLATE: Social Media Post - Example Project

[DOWNLOAD INDESIGN TEMPLATE](#)

[PREVIEW PDF](#)

TEMPLATE: Social Media Post - Source to Tap

[DOWNLOAD INDESIGN TEMPLATE](#)

[PREVIEW PDF](#)

CONSIDERATIONS BEYOND THE TOOLKIT

The material types and message/image variations were developed based on insights from scoping calls with utility and community leaders, as well as feedback from community focus groups.

It is important to recognize that not all community members will have access to the same materials. For example, people who do not receive a water bill directly—such as renters—may never see a bill insert/mailer. For this reason, it is important to also create print banner versions that can be displayed at community events and/or utility offices of which community members frequent, as well as shareable content for social media to expand reach and accessibility.

Additionally, due to the scope and funding of this project, many of the materials focus on each city's drinking water system. However, water service providers and partners may also consider developing similar materials that highlight the value and costs of wastewater and stormwater systems.

As emphasized throughout this toolkit, effective communication depends on aligning messages and visuals with the values and priorities of the communities the systems are serving. This requires intentional engagement and listening activities before developing materials. For more information on conducting these activities and incorporating community insights into communication efforts, you can review The Alliance's [Messaging for Results Toolkit](#).

Effective communications—including clear messaging, relatable imagery, and trusted communication channels—are essential for building public understanding and strengthening trust in government institutions, particularly when communities are being asked to support long-term investments in essential public services like clean, reliable water.

APPENDIX

These flyers can be used to inform community members about Stage 3 of the process and invite them to participate in community focus groups. Be sure to develop materials in languages that are accessible and relevant to the communities you serve.

You're Invited!

Community Focus Group on Columbus Water Systems Messaging



Help shape how we talk about investing in our water systems.

During this session, participants will:

- Review different messages and images related to Columbus water systems
- Share what feels clear, confusing, or effective
- Help identify which messages and images best improve understanding of water system costs and needs

Focus Group details

- Format: Virtual (Microsoft Teams)
- Length: 90 minutes
- When: April 7 at 6pm EST

We're looking for community members who:

- Live or work in the Columbus area
- Are interested in community issues, public services, or infrastructure
- Want to share their perspectives and experiences

Why Participate?

- Have your voice heard
- Help improve how public agencies communicate with the community
- Support informed community decision-making
- Participants will receive a gift card for their time.

No technical expertise is required – just your honest perspective and local knowledge.

Space is limited.
To participate, use [this sign-up link](#) or scan the QR code to register by March 21, 2026.



For questions or accommodation requests, contact: Erica DePalma at edepalma@uswateralliance.org.



¡Está invitado!

Grupo de discusión comunitario sobre la mensajería de los sistemas de agua de Portland



Ayude a determinar cómo hablamos sobre la inversión en nuestros sistemas de agua.

Durante esta sesión los participantes:

- Revisarán diferentes mensajes e imágenes relacionados con los sistemas de agua de Portland
- Comparta lo que considera claro, confuso o efectivo
- Ayude a identificar qué mensajes e imágenes mejoran el entendimiento de los costos y necesidades del sistema del agua

Detalles del grupo de discusión

- Formato: virtual (en línea)
- Duración: 90 minutos
- Fecha y hora: 23 de abril, 5pm PST
- Plataforma: Microsoft Teams

Estamos buscando miembros de la comunidad que:

- Vivan o trabajen en el área de Portland
- Estén interesados en los temas comunitarios, servicios públicos o infraestructura
- Deseen compartir sus perspectivas y experiencias

¿Por qué participar?

- Haga que su voz se escuche
- Ayude a mejorar cómo se comunican las agencias públicas con la comunidad
- Apoye la toma de decisiones de la comunidad informada
- Los participantes recibirán una tarjeta de regalo por su tiempo.

No se requiere experiencia técnica, solo su perspectiva honesta y conocimiento local.

El espacio es limitado.
Para participar, use [este enlace de registro](#) o escanee el código QR para registrarse antes del 1 de abril de 2026.



Para preguntas o solicitudes de adaptaciones, contacte a: Erica DePalma en la dirección edepalma@uswateralliance.org.



Date & Time: April 16th, 5pm PST
Platform: Microsoft Teams

Space is limited.
To participate, use [this sign-up link](#) or scan the QR code to register by April 1, 2026.



For questions or accommodation requests, contact: Erica DePalma at edepalma@uswateralliance.org.

